

---

WOUTER VAN DUN

Heidelberg University Clinic for General Psychiatry  
wouter-van-dun@hotmail.com.

---

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION TO PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: AN INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY

---

## *abstract*

*This paper seeks to delve into the phenomenological understanding of the psychopathology of imagination by drawing insights from two influential figures within the phenomenological tradition. It examines Sartre's explicit contemplations on imagination in light of Merleau-Ponty's ontological concept of perceptual faith. These perspectives intersect on a crucial aspect of the psychopathology of imagination: its emergence from an inherent discomfort with uncertainty. The gradual erosion of our pre-reflective perceptual faith disrupts the typically serene state of the nonpathological mind. Imagination, in response, may emerge as a means to restore certainty. However, in the context of pathological tendencies towards certainty, the imaginary may shed its 'as-if' function and overthrow the intersubjective meaning-context, leading individuals into a state of quasi-solipsism.*

---

## *keywords*

*phenomenology, imagination, psychopathology, perceptual faith, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty*

**Introduction** This paper commences with a crucial acknowledgment of the significant yet often overlooked role of imagination in shaping the subjective experience of suffering across various psychopathologies. The epistemology of contemporary natural science, which remains dominant in the current psychiatric framework – with neuroscience being the most influential – faces limitations in measuring the unobservable ‘inner life’ of patients.<sup>1</sup> This results in the neglect of such subjective phenomena within research and clinical contexts. Consequently, the existing psychiatric framework lacks a comprehensive conceptual foundation to address the subjective pathological experiences related to imagination.<sup>2</sup>

A phenomenological approach to psychopathology endeavors to elucidate the fundamental configurations of subjective experience at a pre-reflective stage. This stage encompasses experiential structures including embodiment, temporality, selfhood, intersubjectivity, and basic trust. The phenomenological comprehension aims to identify vulnerabilities within these foundational frameworks, elucidating how disruptions at this pre-reflective level could precipitate symptomatic manifestations. By delving into this pre-categorical realm of experience, psychiatrists can enhance their grasp of phenomena, potentially informing treatment approaches that transcend mere categorization as products of cerebral dysfunction.

This paper aims to contribute to a comprehensive elucidation of the phenomenological understanding of the psychopathology of imagination, drawing inspiration from two prominent figures in the phenomenological tradition. Jean-Paul Sartre’s work, particularly *The Imaginary*, stands as an unparalleled source of descriptions of imagination. Additionally, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, while more implicit on the topic, underscores the ontological intertwinement of embodied perceptual and imaginary experiences. This essay explores Sartre’s explicit reflections on imagination against the backdrop of Merleau-Ponty’s

---

1 Over the past decades, psychiatry has been significantly influenced by the rise of neuroscience. The epistemology of neuroscience, which predominantly adopts a reductionistic approach by attributing most aspects of life to brain activity, leaves little room for coherent, integrative approaches to understanding human beings. For a comprehensive discussion, see Fuchs (2018). Consequently, psychopathologies are often treated primarily as brain dysfunctions, with pharmaceutical interventions being the main form of treatment. Despite its successes, this heavy reliance on neurobiology has led the psychiatric framework to struggle with integrating physiological, ecological and humanistic aspects. For a detailed examination of this issue, refer to de Haan (2022).

2 Fortunately, interdisciplinary research involving enactive biology, philosophical anthropology, and phenomenology is currently attempting to bridge the gap between the objectifying tendencies of natural science and subjective experiences. For examples of such efforts, see Fuchs (2018) and de Haan (2022).

ontological notion of perceptual faith. In recognizing the differences between the two friends, while emphasizing their converging perspectives on the psychopathology of imagination, I suggest *the psychopathology of imagination arises from a fundamental intolerance of uncertainty*. As will become clear, from a phenomenological perspective, the notion of ‘uncertainty’ refers to the breakdown of perceptual faith.

The exploration of this thesis will unfold in two main sections: first, an examination of Sartre’s phenomenology of imagination and its psychopathological aspects, explicitly presented in *The Imaginary*. Second, in order to arrive at an ontological understanding of imagination and its psychopathological tendencies, an exploration of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perceptual faith (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). These two initial steps will then lead us to a short analysis of certain psychopathologies in light of the phenomenological findings.

In the following segment, I aim to explore three pivotal concepts within Sartre’s theory of imagination. These concepts serve as foundational pillars, illuminating the link between the psychopathology of imagination and the perceptual realm.<sup>3</sup> This exploration will pave the way for an integration with Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, which will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section. The three key concepts under scrutiny are: (1) *spasm of consciousness*, (2) *situatedness*, and (3) *poverty*.

### 1.1. *The Spasm of Consciousness*

To expound upon Sartre’s interpretation of the psychopathology of imagination, it is imperative to grasp that Sartre’s examination of imagination fundamentally constitutes a repudiation of representationalism – a philosophical stance positing that mental images are akin to tangible objects confined within the mind, analogous to an object contained within a vessel (Breur, 2003). Representationalism remains implicitly entrenched in contemporary neurocognitive research, as well as pervading common parlance and literary discourse.<sup>4</sup> According to this perspective, mental images are construed as possessing attributes akin to concrete worldly entities; they are endowed with a semblance of objective existence.

Sartre’s phenomenology staunchly repudiates representationalism. Both perception and imagination, within this framework, are construed as intentional acts of consciousness; they invariably involve a directedness *towards* an object. Despite the absence of the imagined object in tangible form, phenomenology does not position the imagined object as an entity confined within the mind (or the brain, for that matter). Rather, the ‘presentification’ of the imagined object constitutes a modality of consciousness; it is the intentional relationship towards the absent object, facilitated by an image, that is consciousness in that moment of imaginative engagement.<sup>5</sup> And, as the object of imagination is essentially absent, yet present in a manner

## 1. Sartre on the Psychopathology of Imagination

---

<sup>3</sup> While it might seem unexpected given the common categorization of Sartre’s philosophy as emphasizing the disparity between imagination and perception, I argue that despite Sartre’s acknowledgment of their differences, this doesn’t necessarily imply a complete disconnection between perception and imagination.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Swaab (2014) and Churchland (1988) and Nitsan (2017) and Eagleman (2015; 2016).

<sup>5</sup> The term was originally coined by Husserl and has since been incorporated into the phenomenological discourse on imagination. Husserl’s framework hinges on the distinction between signitive and intuitive acts, particularly within intuitive acts, where he further differentiates between those that directly present their object and those that presentify something not tangibly given. The former category includes presentations, while the latter encompasses presentifications. Recollections, anticipations, phantasy, and image consciousness are classified under presentifications. What characterizes presentifications is their inherent intuitiveness, despite the object not being materially present at the moment.

It is important to note that Sartre still used the term ‘representations,’ although he did not refer to them as a psychic state but rather in the sense of what is represented. I have chosen to use Husserl’s term instead, as it avoids the

akin to a perceived object, Sartre (2004) speaks of a 'quasi-observation', similar to Husserl (1976) attributing to the imaginary an essential 'as-if' quality. This 'quasi' or 'as-if' quality thus implies a kind of ambiguous intention towards something present yet absent.

At any rate, the imaginary mode of consciousness is the relation to the absent object as image rather than that the image resides within consciousness. When I imagine a horse, I am not merely perceiving an image within my mind; instead, what is given is the immediate presence of that imaginary horse. Consequently, the image serves merely to signify the dynamic nexus of consciousness and the object it endeavors to presentify. The image neither materializes as an object nor lends itself to description; rather, it assumes the role of a conduit through which the object emerges.

Sartre's theory hinges crucially on the assertion that during episodes of imagination, the perceptual world undergoes a process of *neutralization*, which Husserl (1976) already termed "ontic neutrality" (p. 248). It is important to clarify that this neutralization does not entail the expulsion of the perceptual world from consciousness or the blocking out of external stimuli and their affectivity. A diminishment of the world does not trigger daydreams, nor are dreams induced by falling asleep. In fact, individuals often engage in heightened daydreaming during, for example, a lecture. The professor is still heard. How could otherwise, when the teacher sees you drowsing off, the sudden call of your name 'bring you back'? Instead, neutralization signifies a shift in the experiential mode through which the external world is encountered (Breur, 2003). The world loses its usual potency or immediacy; its weightiness and fulness are attenuated but remain perceptible. As a result, a space for the 'as-if' is opened up.

Now, the transition from reality to the 'as-if' mode, and the subsequent neutralization of the perceptual world, to varying extents, nuancedly eludes our conscious volition. The very initial moment always occurs spontaneously. Consider attempting to force oneself to perceive an animal in the inkblots; despite concerted efforts, the shift occurs with an abruptness that is experienced like something has suddenly 'clicked' into place (Breur, 2003). This sudden click exemplifies a form of spontaneous creativity essential to consciousness, one that (minutely) misaligns with deliberate intention. Moreover, the process of imagination defies gradual evolution; unlike a painter meticulously refining their creation stroke by stroke, the imaginary object manifests abruptly and unequivocally, with a concrete absolutism from the very initial moment, or not at all. It is precisely this sudden evocation that underscores a subtle disjunction between conscious will and spontaneity – a dissociation Sartre (2004) dramatically terms the "spasm of consciousness" (p. 154), a notion that becomes crucial for his perspective on the pathologies of imagination (see further discussion). Despite resolving to maintain focus during a lecture, one finds the mind inevitably and involuntarily drifting towards images of a cozy bed adorned with soft pillows. Imagination always emerges as a spontaneous act wherein the perceptual world undergoes neutralization.

### 1.2. *The Situatedness of Imagination in the Perceptual World*

From a Sartrean perspective, we can argue that the relationship between imagination and perception is delineated by the assertion that these two phenomena represent distinct yet interdependent modes of consciousness. In the realm of perception, intentionality is directed towards objects that are present before me, 'in the flesh', awaiting my engagement. Engaging in the act of perception involves affirming the presence of these objects and bringing them forth into my awareness. This dynamic entails a relational process wherein the mind interacts

---

ambiguity associated with the term 'representation.' This choice should not, however, undermine Sartre's account. For a discussion on Sartre's divergence from Husserl's account of imagination, see Stawarska (2005).

with external stimuli, inviting exploration and unveiling multiple facets or profiles of the perceived object. Notably, the manner in which the perceived object manifests is contingent upon this interaction; for instance, the inability to simultaneously perceive the back and front sides of an object underscores the selective nature of perception.

The multiplicity of facets present in the world exerts an influence upon me. As I engage with the external world through my faculties of perception, I encounter a palpable sense of penetrativeness or weightiness inherent in the objects I unveil. This relational process involves uncovering concrete objects and enduring their tangible impact on me. Whether through subtle shifts in gaze or more pronounced bodily responses, such as reflexive movements mirroring external stimuli, I navigate the world from my vantage point as the central locus of experience. From this perspective, all interrelated connections that shape my existence converge to form what we perceive as the world. In essence, I am situated at the nexus of this synthetic engagement with the world, wherein consciousness synthesizes the myriad interactions and influences that define my experience. This ‘mine-ness’ of my experience due to this centrality is often referred to as *ipseity*.

In the realm of imagination, we encounter an intentional act characterized by its orientation towards that which is absent. The imaginary mode is indeed a ‘quasi’ mode of observation. However, there is more to say about imagination compared to perception. While imagination also involves a sense of *ipseity*, Sartre underscores the distinct nature of this experience by highlighting a key disparity: unlike perception, imagination does not allow us to observe the multiplicity of profiles and intricate details associated with perceived objects. As an illustrative exercise, consider attempting to imagine the Pantheon in Paris. Now try to count its pillars, and to ‘see’ the detailed profile of its stone structure. Such a task proves elusive, if not impossible – it is thus not a perceptual ‘seeing’. As a result, only perception is inherently susceptible to the element of surprise – one does not yet perceive the invisible side of the thing. In the imaginary, in contrast, there is no invisible not-yet. The imagined object is always already constituted as absolute, including its profile (see further, section 1.3.). To imagine the backside of the thing means the conjuring of an entirely new image.

Nevertheless, imagination thus constitutes a kind of “magical act”, endowed with the remarkable capacity to summon forth entities or scenarios that are absent from immediate reality:

The act of imagination, as we have just seen, is a magical act. It is an incantation destined to make the object of one’s thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. *There is always, in that act, something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take account of difficulties.* Thus, the very young child, from his bed, acts on the world by orders and prayers (Sartre, 2004, p. 125, emphasis added).

Within this framework, Sartre does *not* postulate imagination as a diminished form of perception; rather, it embodies a distinct, yet again, dependent, mode of consciousness. Unlike perception, where the focus lies on the apprehension of existing phenomena, imagination operates by engaging with the absence of objects in situations, thereby paving the way for an ‘as-if’ presentification through an alternative intentional act. Consequently, a certain tension arises between imagination and perception: the very act of conjuring absent objects necessitates a relinquishment of focus on the present perceptual background (neutralization). This tension arises from a *splitting of consciousness*. According to Husserl, when I ‘presentify’ a scene in the ‘as-if’ mode while I peel a banana, consciousness stays in latent intentionality tethered to the perceptual world. Simultaneously, by splitting, it establishes patent

intentionality towards the imagined object. What determines the patency or latency – the foreground or background lived-experience – is in which intentional act the ego resides.<sup>6</sup> At the onset of imagination, we are hence dealing with a kind of ‘gestalt switch’: what lies in the foreground is now placed in the background, so that the absent object may take centre stage.

Now, the relationship between object and subject undergoes a fundamental reversal within the realm of imaginary acts (Breur, 2003). Here, the typical bodily and psychic effects precede the emergence of the imaginary object, actively contributing to its manifestation. For instance, whereas in the perceptual domain, the movement of a swing may prompt my eyes to follow its trajectory as a reactive effect, in the realm of imagination, I must replicate similar ocular movements to conjure the image of the swing anew. Unlike in perception, where ocular movement is an accompaniment of external stimuli, in imagination, it serves as the very catalyst for the mental image to materialize. Cease the ocular movement, and the moving image dissipates accordingly. In this context, ocular movement functions as a (motor) *analogon*, facilitating the imaginative process. Thus, the embodied actions that typically accompany perception now serve as crucial stepping stones, enabling the conjuring of absent objects within the landscape of imagination. Given Sartre’s reflections, then, we can speak of imagination as an *embodied enactment* rather than a passive image ‘in the head’.

Sartre’s central contention lies in the notion that the present perceptual world undergoes neutralization, yet concurrently *serves as a framework through which consciousness apprehends what it seeks to manifest in its absence*. This dynamic is vividly exemplified when individuals engage in imaginative reenactments in moments of anger, expressing fury through gestures like punching a wall and articulating vows of vengeance. However, the anger is not merely a reaction to the imagined scenario; rather, it serves as a vehicle for the re-imagination of the evoking situation. The escalation of anger intensifies this process, as individuals immerse themselves further into the affective *analogon* of the imagined act, effectively neutralizing their objectified selves into an imaginary construct. This reenactment offers a temporary reprieve from the burdensome weight of reality. Individuals often engage in an imaginary identification with a heroic self, depicting themselves as overcoming the situation. Yet, when confronted with the actual individual the following day, their imagined courage falters, revealing the inadequacy of their heroic facade in the face of reality’s penetrative weightiness, including all its invisibilities and un-expectancies.<sup>7</sup> The imaginary is thus never the source of affection, but always the expression thereof. Contemplation of Italian cuisine is never the sole cause of salivary gland activity. Instead, the contemplation is an expression of (an unconscious) desire for food. The hunger and the saliva that accumulates around the tongue serve as an affective, embodied catalyst for the created image.

---

6 See Husserl’s correspondence with Jean Hering in Husserl (1994). See also Jacobs (2010). Scholars have often indicated this splitting as an “ego-splitting”, but I think this terminology is misleading. See, for example Geniusas (2022). They argue that when I daydream, I duplicate myself into the imagination: I do not simply imagine the sunrise, but imagine myself seeing the sunrise. There would thus occur an ego-splitting, where one ego imagines, and the other is imagined. However, as we have just seen, the ego is that which accompanies the explicit, foreground lived-experience. When I imagine something – albeit that I imagine myself seeing something – my ego lives in the imagination. I am not at the same time explicitly living the act of daydreaming and the daydream itself. In fact, the moment I realize that I am daydreaming, my ego leaves the imagination and shifts back to reality, destroying the imaginary altogether. As Sartre also indicates, the imagination is at the mercy of reflection: the moment I am aware of my imagination, I (that is, my ego) am inevitably pulled out of it (Sartre, 2004, p. 312). Instead, I suggest we speak of a splitting of consciousness, where the ego resides on one side.

7 Phenomenological quantitative research has demonstrated that, indeed, daydreams often involve an idealized, heroic self (Somer, 2002).

### 1.3. *The Poverty of the Imaginary*

According to Sartre, despite the possible absurdity of its content, the imagined object is inherently poor in comparison to perception. Unlike concrete entities endowed with individuality and distinct profiles, the imagined object lacks such inherent attributes. The subject initially imbues every aspect it encompasses, leaving no room for unforeseen developments or spontaneous revelations. Unlike the unpredictability inherent in perception, where surprises may arise, the imagined object unfolds precisely as the subject prescribes. There exists no potential for unexpected leaps or novel insights within the confines of the imagined construct. Each constructed image is only what it is when created. Attempting to augment the imagined object is an exercise in futility; any addition necessitates the destruction of the existing image, and the creation of an entirely new presentification. If one endeavors to imagine the Duomo of Milan, the resulting depiction will likely appear vague and lacking in detail. It is impossible to ‘see’ the very textures of its walls, or the concrete depictions of its detail-rich doors. It remains a static presentification, devoid of the dynamic richness and depth characteristic of perceptual experiences. In essence, the imagined object is finite and devoid of the capacity for exploration or expansion – it exists as an absolute and total entity from its inception; *the imaginary is characterized by an essential poverty*.

For this reason, Sartre posits that there is no imaginary ‘world’: meaning a space in which individual objects exist independently. Instead, the realm of imagination is intrinsically linked to the totality of the imagined object itself. Contrary to the notion of an independent, cohesive imaginary realm, the imagined world is inseparable from the imagined object, or better, it is part of the imagined object’s absolutism. Consequently, what crystalizes within the realm of imagination is not a fully realized world but rather a mere semblance – a shadowy reflection devoid of independent movement or existence. In this sense, individuals who drift into daydreams are initially not seeking to immerse themselves in a more enriched alternate realm. Rather, they are attempting to evade the penetrative fullness of reality; they attempt to avoid this resistance, for it often does not allow them to seek what they desire.

In sum, the imaginary thus functions as a spontaneous, embodied act to obscure facets of existence that prove too burdensome to bear. Within the context of heaviness, the imaginary disrupts the fullness and complexity of the world. The poorness of the imaginary provides a more simple and direct articulation of desire. The act of neutralization or derealization invariably stems from a grounded situatedness within the world – a specific standpoint from which the imaginary unfolds. As Sartre (2004) correctly observes, “an image [...] is always *the world denied from a certain point of view*” (pp. 184-185). The imaginary, therefore, serves as a means of neutralizing or distancing oneself from confrontation with the realities of life. However, *it remains inexorably tethered to the world from which it emerges*.

Now, in line with Sartre’s theory of imagination, what happens in the case of psychopathological imagination, such as in schizophrenic psychosis, is not a mere confusion between fantasy and reality, but initially a *profound transformation of the perceptual world itself*. The once stable, consistent, and trusted perceptual horizon begins to erode, losing its capacity to serve as a reliable *situation of neutralization* against which the imaginings are conjured. At the onset of the delusional mood, the invisible sides of things that lay hidden in each shadow of the perceptual horizon appear uncanny and threatening (Fuchs, 2016). The world becomes overwhelmingly unpredictable, and anxiety-inducing. This erosion of reality undermines the distinction between the real and the potential imaginary ‘as-if’, a phenomenon often observed in psychopathologies.<sup>8</sup> The shared perceptual world that was previously delineated as the

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Fuchs (2004).

external realm surrounding the individual, with the self as its synthetic center, dissolves and alienates, realizing a loss of *ipseity*. The spontaneous creativity of consciousness, manifested in the *spasm of consciousness*, radicalizes and escapes the control of the will. The ego paralyzes and loses its grip on the surrounding environment and its potentialities. The individual's relation to the world no longer emanates from the ego with its beliefs, habits and personal history. Instead, it arises from an inner dissociation – an impersonal spontaneity detached from the ego, yet originating from the subject's 'inner life'. The imaginary, detached from its foundational background, assumes a life of its own and overthrows the shared reality.

At the core of Sartre's examination of the psychopathology of imagination lies a convergence with Merleau-Pontian theory: the perceptual horizon erodes, and fills itself with uncertainty. In the subsequent section, we delve into Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith to further understand this characterization of psychopathological imagination. However, it is important to clarify that this paper does not disregard the fundamental divergences between Sartrean and Merleau-Pontian philosophy. Casey has outlined a classification of theories of imagination based on the continuity or discontinuity between imagination and perception (Casey, 2000). He notes how Merleau-Ponty accentuates the continuities between these realms, whereas Sartre emphasizes the discontinuities. It is crucial to recognize that Casey's categorization regarding imagination is indeed primarily a matter of emphasis. This paper primarily adopts a Merleau-Pontian approach concerning the ontology of imagination while endeavoring to underscore those Sartrean descriptions that, as has been demonstrated, may well align with the idea that the imaginary 'as-if' is essentially connected with the perceptual world.

## 2. Merleau-Ponty on the Psychopathology of Imagination

Merleau-Ponty's concept of perceptual faith hinges on Sartre's portrayal of psychopathological imagination. By exploring this concept, we can deepen our comprehension of how imagination serves as a mitigating force against uncertainty. This exploration will involve (1) elaborating on its developmental narrative, (2) examining its ontological significance concerning the realm of the imaginary, and (3) analyzing its breakdown as a fundamental component of psychopathology.

### 2.1. *The developmental account of Perceptual Faith*

To comprehend Merleau-Ponty's concept of perceptual faith, it is beneficial to elucidate it through a developmental framework. Merleau-Ponty draws inspiration from Piaget in this regard, delineating the process through which an infant acquires a sense of reality in its interactions with the external world. Merleau-Ponty echoes Piaget's findings, highlighting that from birth, infants demonstrate an exclusive interest in objects *within* their perceptual field; objects beyond this purview seemingly cease to exist for the infant until direct perception is established. Around the age of six months, observable shifts occur as the infant begins to exhibit behaviors indicative of recognition and interaction with objects situated beyond its immediate perceptual horizon. Notably, the displacement of a toy from the infant's direct view, prompting the toy to exist beyond the infant's immediate perception, signifies the emergence of spatial awareness. Piaget (1954) terms this cognitive milestone 'object constancy', positing its profound ramifications on emotional bonds with caregivers, who now assume a consistent role as objects of attachment.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the phase wherein object constancy emerges serves as the nexus wherein the realms of the imaginary and the real intertwine. Specifically, during this developmental juncture, the imaginary – conceiving existence beyond the visible – and the real – objects maintaining consistent presence – are inherently interconnected from their inception of divergence. Merleau-Ponty (2016) critiques Piaget's "dogmatic rationalism"

(p. 202), contending that it misconstrues this divergence as solely a cognitive process. Rather, Merleau-Ponty posits that it constitutes the initial belief in the spatio-temporal continuity of objects, encompassing both others and self. The imaginary allows for object consistency, and vice versa the object consistency allows for imagination. This developmental phase assumes paramount significance for the infant's subsequent psychological well-being, as postulated by the psychoanalytic tradition. The phase coinciding with the establishment of object constancy is pivotal in nurturing a sense of 'basic trust' in the world, fostered through the consistent presence and reliability of caregivers gradually introduced to the infant (Erikson, 1963; Morley, 1998).

## 2.2. *Ontological Implications of Perceptual Faith*

The philosophical concept that Merleau-Ponty derives from his analysis of Piaget culminates in what he terms *perceptual faith*. It is imperative, however, to recognize that 'perception' in this context transcends the conventional empirical understanding – an internal cognitive process of representing external phenomena. Instead, for Merleau-Ponty, 'perception' embodies the relational essence between the seeing self and the world. Perceiving constitutes a pre-thematic experience that self-evidently knows itself in faith:

It is the greatest degree of belief that our vision goes to the things themselves. Perhaps this experience teaches us better than any other what the perceptual presence of the world is: [...] it is our experience, prior to every opinion, of inhabiting the world by our body, of inhabiting the truth by our whole selves, without there being need to choose nor even to distinguish between the assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true, because in principle they are one and the same thing—faith, therefore, and not knowledge, since the world is here not separated from our hold on it, since, rather than affirmed, it is taken for granted, rather than disclosed, it is non-dissimulated, non-refuted (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 28).

Merleau-Ponty's advocacy for the primacy of perception does not seek to establish perception as a mere antecedent to the imaginary within their metaphysical dichotomy. Rather, he endeavors to ground rationality in its immediate starting point – embodied perception – thereby transcending metaphysical dichotomies and highlighting perception as a faith-like, pre-linguistic, relational encounter encompassing subject-object, inside-outside, perception-imagination dynamics. Indeed, the relational structure of perception denotes a "third genus of Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 314), for "the certitude I have of being connected up with the world by my look already promises me a pseudoword of phantasms" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 28). And both these worlds, "which the perceptual faith keeps side by side within itself, do not nullify one another" (p. 29).

As delineated in the developmental narrative of perceptual faith, the imaginary is intricately interwoven into the fabric of the perceptual realm. In his *Collegue de France* lectures, Merleau-Ponty articulates:

The distinction between the real and the oneiric cannot be identical with the simple distinction between consciousness filled with meaning and consciousness given up to its own void. The two modalities impinge on one another. Our waking relations with objects and others especially have an oneiric character as a matter of principle: others are present to us in the way that dreams are (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 48).

Merleau-Ponty observes that intersubjective encounters bear a dreamlike quality. This is not to say that reality and others appear to us similar to a dream. Merleau-Ponty points

out a nuance difficult to bring into awareness, let alone into words, and which can only be understood against the backdrop of perceptual faith. I believe one may interpret the passage as follows: in the encounter with other minds, which appears invisible and cannot be objectively verified, we invest in a primordial, pre-reflective ‘belief’ in the presence of the other akin to our belief in the reality of dreams when we inhabit them.<sup>9</sup> Again, allow me to emphasize that this ‘belief’ is not an active, conscious belief in the common sense of the word. It rather articulates a pre-conscious, naive belief that roots itself in our embodied relation to the world. Indeed, this deeply rooted belief upholds both the oneiric experience and all “waking relations with objects”. It is precisely this deep-seated ontological conviction that Merleau-Ponty refers to as *perceptual faith*, which commences in the development of object consistency. We approach our engagement with the world with a specific trust analogous to our trust in dreams while immersed in them. Furthermore, this perspective invites a reconsideration of the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary: our faith in the existence of what we see – rooted in our embodied being-towards-the-world – underpins both realms. Our natural attitude also allows for our imagination to occur in a quasi-perceptual manner.

Although the notion of perceptual faith primarily refers to the level of perception, it, as an ontological starting point, extends further into ‘higher’ domains of life. The instant we open our eyes, we accept the world ‘as it is’, namely, as we perceive it. This embodies a faith – a “deep-seated opinion” – that we instinctively and unconsciously impose upon our encounters (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 3). It constitutes a faith ingrained in our body and our natural orientation towards the world. Indeed, we collectively hold an ontological faith in our natural engagement with the world. Perceptual faith constitutes an integral aspect of our shared reality and is shaped by it, co-constituting the establishment of intersubjectivity. It embodies a pre-categorical belief in the reality of our surroundings, deeply ingrained within each individual, thereby transcending individual perspectives and permeating socio-cultural existence; perceptual faith co-constitutes a *transcendental intersubjectivity*. This mutual and deeply rooted belief enables us to swiftly grasp and interpret each other’s expressions and behaviors during our embodied perceptual encounters, laying the groundwork for a *shared intentionality* (Tomasello, 2008) or *common sense*. It is first and foremost this belief that allows me to take an ‘as-if’ stance from the other’s perspective.

Hence, the act of awakening from a dream proves disconcerting, as the dream was inhabited and sustained with the same conviction typically granted to the shared waking world. The sense of disorientation upon awakening stems from the inability to disengage from the perceptual faith that had just enveloped the quasi-world, now binding one anew to reality. This fleeting disconcertion, I argue, can be construed as a phenomenological reduction in the Merleau-Pontian sense – an instance wherein the threads connecting oneself to the world momentarily loosen, thereby facilitating their emergence into phenomenological consciousness. What this moment underscores is not solely the transience of the dream, but also the fragility inherent in perception – a fragility not unfamiliar to individuals with schizophrenia.

---

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty is poised to argue that the objective verification of another’s mind becomes plausible through the direct encounter with their embodied presence. The authenticity of the other finds expression in their unmediated interaction with the world—through gestures, expressions, and speech. However, before reaching this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty embarks on an exploration of how such embodied encounters can serve as a reliable foundation, introducing the concept of perceptual faith. For further insight, refer to the initial chapter, “Reflection and Interrogation,” in Merleau-Ponty (1968).

### 2.3. *The Loss of Perceptual Faith*

In numerous instances of psychopathology, the solidity of perceptual faith wavers, giving rise to a profound sense of ontological insecurity – a true crisis during psychotic episodes, surpassing mere belief in the reality of hallucinations.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many individuals experiencing psychosis retain the capacity to discern between the real and the hallucinatory. The crux of their distress lies in the erosion of confidence in *both their perception and their imagination*, echoing themes explored in Sartre’s writings (see section 1.3.). As we saw earlier, this dynamic engenders suspicion regarding the authenticity of self and world – whether real or imagined. The anguish of these individuals stems from their inability to trust their experiences and embrace a state of relaxation in being-towards-the-world. They endure a perpetual, intensely agitated state of mind – beset by insecurity concerning their identity and surroundings, unable to bring that faith towards the world. They are robbed of the unreflective ease with which a nonpathological individual can navigate everyday existence by simply accepting the world in a natural attitude. And, as James Morley (1998) aptly suggests, this anxious uncertainty engenders a “pathological quest for absolute certainty” (p. 93). Perhaps the nonpathological individual can briefly glimpse this state upon awakening from a dream with that “wonder in the face of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, Preface XV). Yet, they possess the capacity to revert to the sanctuary of perceptual faith, unlike those afflicted by psychopathology (Morley, 1998).

In the context of a paranoid delusional system, the assurance provided by a secure delusion is often preferred over the unsettling uncertainty of not knowing precisely what others are thinking. Such delusions can envelop the subject in solipsism, offering a semblance of security by eliminating the inherent ambiguity within intersubjectivity. For individuals grappling with these delusions, the open-ended nature of the world, full of vulnerability and distrust, becomes intolerable. In fact, this dynamic resonates in various relationships; anyone may experience feelings of jealousy when perceiving seemingly ambiguous signs from their partner. Nevertheless, while the nonpathological individual may possess the ability to contextualize and mitigate such fears, the pathological subject becomes overwhelmed and blinded. Psychopathology effectively illustrates how our natural attitude relies on this fundamental faith, enabling us to pursue dreams, nurture aspirations, and engage in relationships with others.

Rorschach introduced the renowned perception test utilizing cards adorned with inkblots capable of eliciting varied interpretations depending on the observer (Rorschach, 1942). In Husserl’s framework, the Rorschach inkblot cards serve as material objects (*Bildding*), facilitating the manifestation of the image-object (*Bildobjekt*), which represents another absent entity, the image subject (*Bildsujet*) (Husserl, 2005). Given Husserl’s distinction, Rorschach may have proposed that nonpathological individuals can seamlessly navigate between *Bildobjekt* and *Bildsujet*. The ease with which this transition occurs suggests a natural, harmonious interplay between the perceptual and the imaginary realms, akin to an individual who ventures into a daydream and returns from their reveries without conflating or conflicting them with reality. Sartre’s phenomenological insights provide valuable insights into this interplay. Central to this dynamic is the innate capacity to effortlessly neutralize and de-neutralize the background horizon against which the imaginary manifests itself, effectively warding off confusion. However, when this background horizon deteriorates, it may pave the way for the emergence of psychopathological tendencies described earlier (Morley, 1998).

The Rorschach study highlights a phenomenon termed “tolerance of ambiguity”, a

---

<sup>10</sup> See further discussion for more examples.

concept coined by psychologist Frenkel Brunswick, who initially explored this trait in individuals espousing extreme political ideologies (Brunswick, 1958). Merleau-Ponty, in his commentary on Frenkel Brunswick's work during the Sorbonne lectures, underscores how extremist ideologies – whether leaning 'left' or 'right' – mirror a common symptom shared with psychopathological conditions: *a rigid perceptual stance driven by an anxious pursuit of absolute certainty* (Merleau-Ponty, 2016; 1963). Similarly, Breskin's perfectionism test, which evaluates one's *psychological rigidity* by accounting for one's *perceptual* preferences, reflects how perceptions are always already 'pregnant' with meaning from their emergence (Breskin & Wender, 1987).<sup>11</sup> The essential question that both the Rorschach and the Breskin test pose is whether the observer allows for the meaning within this perceptual pregnancy to alternate.

These observations align well with Merleau-Ponty's ontological thesis, positing that our perceptual faith furnishes a pre-reflective, embodied starting point from which the world's ambiguities can be navigated. This deep-seated trust in the world enables us to embrace certain primordial ambiguities of life, such as the dichotomy of the real and the imaginary 'as-if', allowing individuals to seamlessly navigate their perceptual and imaginary experiences without confusion. The non-pathological experience embodies a stance characterized by a more or less flexible receptivity to such dichotomies. In contrast, certain psychopathological conditions are characterized by a dramatic aversion to uncertainty, in which imagination comes to play an important role, exemplifying either an over-engagement or a refusal of this domain.

Being-towards-the-world consists of a continuous attunement or organization of oneself in the face of the world's expected and unexpected possibilities. When my gaze unveils the surface of the world and comes to know what it sees, it at the same veils what hides behind the horizon and remains invisible: every look carries with it blindness. Nevertheless, our perceptual faith encourages us to familiarize ourselves with the "prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows, [...] and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 42). However, when this faith breaks down, the unexpected possibilities of the world, that lay in the shadows of the totality that surrounds me, become eerie and menacing. In such uncertainty, when the atmosphere grows ominous and the doomed is nervously awaited, the imaginary may tame the horror (Fuchs, 2006). As illustrated by Sartre, the imaginary always appears poor and absolute, devoid of surprise, and may thus serve as an escape from the gravity of reality. The imagination fills the gap of the unforeseen and tames the anxious anticipation with a sense of security – even when the monster that lurks between the things is anticipated by a self-created, now-expected monster. By replacing the unexpected with the expected, the uncertain with the certain, the imaginary may (to various extents) pathologically shed its 'as-if' character and integrate into reality as symptomatic salvation.

Hence, one way to look at delusional experiences is as manifestations of an intolerance of uncertainty stemming from the breakdown of perceptual faith. Delusions are characterized

---

<sup>11</sup> The term 'pregnancy' holds pivotal significance within Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. Departing from representationalist perspectives, according to which perception is a process involving the reception of sensory data, which is then evaluated and interpreted within the mind as to establish meaning. Inspired by Gestalt theory, Merleau-Ponty and proponents of the notion of pregnancy contend otherwise. They argue that perception is inherently imbued with meaning from its very inception. According to this view, perceptions are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with significance but are already pregnant with meaning upon emergence. This conception aligns Merleau-Ponty with his broader hypothesis that genuine understanding and truth stem from our immediate, unmediated engagement with the world—a stance that emphasizes the fundamental role of embodied interaction in shaping meaning and truth accessible to all individuals.

by a new form of objectification, or better, pseudo-objectification (Fuchs, 2020). The spasm of consciousness fills in what is 'behind the world', thus establishing a new but unshared meaning context. Hence many delusional systems include absurd phantasies about alien powers. Moreover, in establishing this pseudo-objectification, the delusional person anxiously attempts to 'own the world' and create a new sense of certainty. All shadowy objects now seem to be aimed *at him*. The intentional relation is reversed, resulting in a *subjectification of perception* (Fuchs, 2020). The imaginary 'as-if' thus 'locks in' for its pathological quest towards certainty. The subjectified perception becomes rigid and inflexible. The non-delusional may get scared for a second by the shadow that looked 'as-if' it was another man, and laugh about it with his friend. His common sense, reinforced by the other, immediately takes away the doubt. And if not immediately, his excentric capacity (Plessner) may enable him to take a general, intersubjective point of view, and come to the rational conclusion to confirm the 'as-if' clause. The delusional, on the other hand, cannot take such an excentric stance (Fuchs, 2020). He can no longer perceive the world 'as-if'; he is condemned to his own, rigid world.

Individuals with schizophrenia, for instance, are renowned for their delusional and imaginary inclinations, which disrupt their intersubjective encounters, place them outside of common sense, and propel them toward solipsism, or better, toward quasi-solipsism (Stanghellini, 2004; Parnas & Sass, 2001). This phenomenon comes with a hyper-reflectivity, which renders it increasingly challenging to tolerate the inherent uncertainty inherent in intersubjective interactions – the juxtaposition between the bodily sense of self and the imaginative 'as-if' mode of self-as-other (Fuchs, 2004). This crucial distinction tends to blur, plunging the subject into an anxious state where discerning between self and other becomes difficult. As a reactionary measure against this uncertainty, the dissociated ego recoils into a constructed framework of meaning that erects barriers between natural threads of intersubjectivity.

Paranoid episodes are characterized by a profound inability to trust others, often resulting in delusional tendencies that seek to establish certainty by vilifying others. Their pride in their delusional beliefs may render them unable to acknowledge or address their underlying fears and insecurities. While a nonpathological individual, grounded in shared reality by ontological faith, may perceive signs of loyalty in interactions with others, those experiencing paranoia are constantly besieged by imaginary anticipations that others are plotting against them.

The disruption of intersubjectivity can also be observed in individuals with autism, as they often find the behavior of others too unpredictable (Grohmann, 2017). Unlike 'normal' encounters where the immediate understanding of the other's intentions and expressions is pre-reflectively and bodily assured, individuals with autism may struggle to grasp these cues. As one account describes, they may yearn for human contact, but when it occurs, they may retreat, overwhelmed by pain and confusion (Grandin, 1995). The need for predictability and total control, frequently articulated by individuals with autism, may be accompanied by tendencies towards the imaginary realm. The following testimony exemplifies this:

Emotions can be hard for me to understand or know how to react to, so I often use numbers to help me. If a friend says he feels sad or depressed, I picture myself sitting in the dark hollowness of number 6 to help me experience the same sort of feeling and understand it (Tammet, 2007, p. 7).

Individuals suffering from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder are plagued by relentless imaginary doubts that they are unable to satisfy. These doubts may manifest in a perpetual preoccupation with fears of causing harm or committing errors, such as worrying about inadvertently starting a fire without realizing it. In this case, the threat is not found from

the perceptual background horizon, but from the temporal one. Husserl showed that the experiential background, or the unconscious in the phenomenological sense, also comprises one's retentions and sedimentations (Husserl, 2006). It is precisely these retentions that become the threatening shadow for OCD patients.

Furthermore, mania is often marked by an exaggerated sense of optimism that transcends the constraints of reality. Individuals experiencing mania may find their imagination overpowering reality, expressing euphoric beliefs of invincibility or boundless potential. In contrast, depression is characterized by a pervasive sense of pessimism. In this state, the optimistic potentials of the imagination are extinguished, leaving individuals unable to infuse reality with hope for a brighter future. Mundane everyday tasks become exceptionally burdensome, devoid of any prospect of relief or improvement.

In all these instances, although in varying ways, the imagination counterposes the uncertainty that lays bare the individual's vulnerability. This essential vulnerability, encountered by each of us in life – be it through disease, profound loss, aging, or other moments of helplessness – can potentially erode one's trust in the world, including oneself, to such a degree that it can propel one into psychopathological suffering. The world may become a place of betrayal, even at the level of perception itself.

The psychopathology of imagination, therefore, denotes those instances where the person loses faith in the world and seeks to compensate for the anticipated pain lurking around every corner. It does so by proactively filling those shadowy recesses while forgetting the 'as-if' nature of their creative capacity. As such, the experienced fabric of reality may alter, leaving the person in a state of solitary existence.

#### REFERENCES

- Breur, R. (2003). Verbeelding en werkelijkheid. *Bijdragen, International Journal in Philosophy and Theology*, 64, 20-38. doi: 10.2143/BIJ.64.1.503588;
- Brunswik, E. (1958). Perception and the representative design of psychological experiments. In *Readings in Social Psychology* (pp. 187-223);
- Casey, E. (2000). *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press;
- Churchland, P. M. (1988). *Matter and consciousness: A contemporary introduction to the philosophy of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press;
- Daniel, T. (2007). *Born on a blue day*. New York, NY: Free Press;
- De Haan, S. (2022). *Enactive psychiatry: Integrating phenomenology, neuroscience, and psychotherapy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press;
- Eagleman, D. (2015). *The brain: The story of you*. New York, NY: Pantheon;
- Eagleman, D. (2016). *Incognito: The secret lives of the brain*. New York, NY: Vintage;
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company;
- Fuchs, T. (2004). The 'as-if' function and its loss in schizophrenia. *Philosophical Psychology*, 17(2), 167-182. doi: 10.1080/0951508042000210943;
- Fuchs, T. (2016). The uncanny as atmosphere. *New Literary History*, 47(4), 501-520. doi: 10.1353/nlh.2016.0033;
- Fuchs, T. (2018). *Ecology of the brain: The phenomenology and biology of the embodied mind*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press;
- Fuchs, T. (2020). Delusion, reality and intersubjectivity: A phenomenological and enactive analysis. *Phenomenology and Mind*, 18, 120-143. doi: 10.13128/Phe\_Mi-11591;
- Grandin, T. (1995). *Ma vie d'autiste*. Paris: Odile Jacob;
- Grohmann, T. (2017). Intersubjective expression in autism and schizophrenia. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 16(4), 715-733. doi: 10.1007/s11097-017-9518-1;

- Geniusas, S. (2022). *Versunkenheit: The phenomenology of absorption in Husserl and Heidegger*. Dordrecht: Springer;
- Husserl, E. (1976). *Ideen zu einer reinen phänomenologie und phänomenologischen philosophie*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff;
- Husserl, E. (1994). *Briefwechsel*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers;
- Husserl, E. (2005). *Phantasy, image consciousness, and memory (1898-1925)* (J. B. Brough, Trans.). Dordrecht: Springer;
- Husserl, E. (2006). *The basic problems of phenomenology: From the lectures, winter semester, 1910-1911*. Dordrecht: Springer;
- Jacobs, H. (2010). I am awake: Husserlian reflections on attention and wakefulness. *Alter* 18, 183-201. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/alter.1676>;
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1963). *The structure of behavior* (A. L. Fisher, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press;
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press;
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1970). *Themes from the lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960* (J. O'Neill, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press;
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception* (D. A. Landes, Trans.). London: Routledge;
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2016). *The Sorbonne lectures: 1949-1952* (J. O'Neill, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press;
- Morley, J. (1998). The imaginary texture of the real. *Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 87-102. doi: 10.1080/095023898335439;
- Parnas, J., & Sass, L. A. (2001). Solipsism, self, and schizophrenic delusions. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, 8, 101-120. doi: 10.1353/ppp.2001.0004;
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child* (M. Cook, Trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books;
- Rorschach, H. (1942). *Psychodiagnostik: Methodik und Ergebnisse eines wahrnehmungsdiagnostischen Experiments*. Bern: Hans Huber;
- Sartre, J.-P. (2004). *The imaginary* (J. Webber, Trans.). London: Routledge;
- Somer, E. (2002). Maladaptive daydreaming: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 32, 197-211. doi: 10.1023/A:1020597026919;
- Stanghellini, G. (2004). *Disembodied spirits and deanimated bodies: The psychopathology of common sense*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press;
- Stawarska, B. (2005). *Defining imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press;
- Swaab, D. (2014). *We are our brains: From the womb to Alzheimer's*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau;
- Tomasello, M. (2008). *Origins of human communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.